

# Finding a **workout** that keeps you **smiling**

Emma O'Toole turned to exercise to try lose some weight gained during her early years with diabetes. She quickly found that in order to keep it up, you have to find something that suits you and keeps you happy, writes **Deborah Condon**

**W**hen Emma O'Toole was a teenager with Type 1 diabetes, she wasn't allowed to take part in PE lessons because it was seen as too risky, leading her to feel like she "could not exercise". She now runs her own yoga business and this has helped her both physically and mentally.

Now in her mid-40s and living in Greystones, Emma was diagnosed with Type 1 in 1990 when she was around 13 or 14 and in first year of secondary school. She recalls that she could not quench her thirst at the time and had lost a significant amount of weight in a short time.

Just after the Easter weekend of 1990, she started to feel very ill and was vomiting quite a lot. She ended up developing diabetic ketoacidosis (DKA), a serious complication of diabetes which occurs when there is a build-up of acids in the blood called ketones. If left untreated, DKA can lead to loss of consciousness and death.

Emma was in a coma for four days, which was "very scary" for her family.

Thankfully, she responded to treatment and recovered. However, she and her family now had to learn all about Type 1 diabetes and how to manage it.

"I was told about the potential complications and I don't know if it was the shock factor or fear factor, but I did look after myself," she says.



*When being faced with a potential redundancy a second time Emma O'Toole decided to take the leap and turn her hobby – yoga – into her new profession*

However, when she was at school, she was left sitting on the bench during PE lessons.

"The PE teachers couldn't handle my diabetes – I was seen as a risk. As a result, I felt like I could not exercise and I gained a lot of weight," she explains.

### **Tackling exercise and weight gain**

She started working in technology at the age of 19 and decided to join a gym. She was shown how to use the different machines and weights, but she admits that she was "miserable" there.

"One day, I was pedaling away on the cycling machine when I saw people carrying mats going into a room. An hour later, I was on a treadmill right beside the door to that room. The door opened and people came out sweating but smiling. I thought 'why are they smiling, why do they look happy and I am miserable. What is wrong with this picture?' I went straight to the desk and asked what class had been in that room and was told yoga," she recalls.

She signed up to do an eight-week course and loved it.

Emma continued to work in technology, but in 2011, the world was in recession and her job came under threat. She worked on a team of three, however, one of these was going to be made redundant.

"We all had to reapply for our own jobs. This was highly stressful and wasn't helping my blood glucose levels. I had been there 13 years at this stage and in the end, I did keep my job, but I knew this could happen again," she notes.

### **Light bulb moment**

She remembers a light bulb moment while talking to her mother about this stressful situation. Her mum asked her what her hobby was and when Emma said yoga, she said "why don't you turn your hobby into a career?".

Soon after, Emma found a teacher training course, which she was able to

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do at the weekends so that she could continue working. She became fully qualified in 2012.

In 2015, her company underwent another restructure.

"This time I said 'let me go, I won't fight for the job'. I was already teaching yoga part-time. So one day in December 2015, I left my job and on that same day, I signed a lease for a year with another yoga teacher to open a studio. When one door closes, another opens," she points out.

A year later, she decided not to continue with the studio and instead, starting renting spaces throughout Dublin and Wicklow to offer classes. However, she says she "spread herself too thin" and the stress of that was having a big impact on her body, including her blood glucose levels.

### A curse and a blessing

"I know the pandemic has been a curse in so many ways, but it was also a blessing for me because I had to stop spreading myself so thin and put a pause on things. Because I came from a technology background, I was easily able to transition my business online. The only struggle was getting people to come with me," she notes.

She currently works almost exclusively online.

Emma emphasises that yoga can have a positive impact on people with diabetes, both physically and mentally, as it is a great stress-reliever.

"Many people simply can't stop or pause because it is too uncomfortable for them. But if they can just learn to breathe first and then move, the body responds in a

very positive way. Lots of people think yoga is just stretching, but there is so much more to it," she adds.

For more information on Emma's yoga classes, visit [www.yogawithemma.ie](http://www.yogawithemma.ie)

